WHY DID JESUS DIE?
April 6, 2003

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 51:1-12
John 12:20-33

"And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."
John 12:32 (NRSV)

As we proceed through these days of Lent, O God, with our Lord's passion somehow deepened and intensified by what is happening in the world he so loved and for which he died, open us once again to your amazing grace and eternal love. Startle us, O God, with your truth, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

We are all in some way seekers this morning, are we not? We have come to church this morning looking for help—for a word, an idea, a hymn, a prayer, a text that will help us make sense of the distressing events occurring in the world around us; for a word, an idea, a hymn, a prayer, or a person who will help us cope with the news we see on CNN, NBC, and in the daily paper. We are all in some way looking for Jesus this morning, although we probably wouldn't say it that way. "Sir, we wish to see Jesus" is the way some Greeks put it to Philip, one of Jesus' disciples. That's us, whether we say it or not. "We wish to see Jesus."

David Brooks—whose bestseller *Bobos in Paradise* brilliantly described the way newly wealthy young adults were changing American culture, American behavior, styles, buying habits a few years ago—wrote a fascinating article last month for the *Atlantic Monthly* under the title "Kicking the Secularist Habit." Secularism, Brooks now says, was a big mistake. "Secularism is not the future; it is yesterday's incorrect version of the future." It's not really economics that drives human behavior. "People everywhere," Brooks says, "long for meaning, purpose, and righteousness beyond economics. . . . Human beings yearn for a world that reflects God's will in many cases as strongly as they yearn for money or success."

A few years ago an economist by the name of Robert Theobald wrote the book *Remaking Success*. He wrote it at the very height of the bull market. Every indicator was high and pointing up. We were living in a new world. There were no international threats to speak of. Our country was at peace. Budgets were balanced. Deficits were gone. It was, apparently, a time of

unprecedented prosperity. Why then, Theobald had the temerity to ask, why were people still so anxious, so stressed? He answered, “We know better. What we really want is not a higher income, more and more comfort. What we really want is a higher quality of life, healthier relationships, and a more compassionate society.” I was struck with Theobald’s almost eerie assessment, which he made two years before 9/11, that it would take a major event, a national crisis or tragedy “to reveal the spiritual disconnect.”

“Sir, we would see Jesus.” In the post-9/11 world, a world vastly different, radically new, a dangerous, violent world, a world that in the past two weeks has been dominated by a war that would have been unthinkable, inconceivable, two years ago, we are all, in some way or another, looking for Jesus.

It’s an odd little story. Some Greeks wanted to see Jesus. They ask Philip. Philip tells Andrew and Philip and Andrew tell Jesus, “There are some Greeks looking for you.” Jesus responds with a little story about a grain of wheat remaining just that, a single grain, unless it falls into the earth and dies, and then it produces much fruit. And then he teaches: those who love their lives, maintain the status quo, protect and conserve their lives, will lose them. But those who hate their lives—elsewhere he says, “lose their lives for my sake”—will find them, will have eternal life, real life, full life. It is one of the consistent motifs in the New Testament. If you want to live, really live, you have to learn to give your life away, have to learn how to die.

And then this haunting statement, which over the years I have always found so compelling: “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”

When it happened, when he was lifted up from the earth, when he lived out the parable of the grain of wheat dying in order to live, when Jesus of Nazareth, in the full bloom of young adulthood, was crucified, something decisive, something compelling, something the human race has never been able to forget or ignore, happened.

The cross is the central symbol of our faith, of course. It adorns our churches, hospitals, and health care organizations. It is perhaps the most popular item of jewelry in the whole history of jewelry. There are crosses on gold chains, crosses of gold and silver and wood. There are red, white, and blue crosses, crosses adorned with diamonds, crosses on rings, on pins, tie clasps. There are tattoo crosses. If you walk into the Art Institute and bypass the Impressionists and wander into the Renaissance—something everybody should do during Lent—you will discover that the death of Jesus on a cross is something like the central event in the history of art.

Think of the music, all the Masses and Requiems—Bach, Mozart, modern Masses—all composed around this event: his being lifted up and drawing all people to him. Think of the gorgeous hymns:

> "O Sacred Head now wounded. . . .What language shall I borrow to thank thee dearest friend?"
>
> "Oh, who am I that for my sake my Lord should take frail flesh and die? . . . This is my friend, in whose sweet praise I all my days could gladly spend."
>
> "When I survey the wondrous cross"
>
> "Beneath the cross of Jesus"
>
> "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?"

Sometimes people walk in here and ask why there are no crosses, and we tell them that when you are in this sanctuary you are sitting or standing in the middle of the cross: Gothic churches are cruciform.

Great writers are compelled—even non-Christians.

Norman Mailer, who is Jewish, with amazing insight tells the story of Jesus in the first person”

> They drove a spike into each of my wrists and another spike through each of my feet. I did not cry out. But I saw the heavens divide. . . . They raised the cross from the ground, and it was as if I climbed higher and into greater pain. This pain traveled across a space as vast as the seas.” (*The Gospel According to the Son,* p. 220)

Ernest Hemingway—no friend of institutional Christianity—could not ignore the figure of Jesus, particularly his crucifixion. In an amazing short story, *Today Is Friday*, three Roman soldiers are drinking in a bar after a particularly difficult Friday afternoon. They are rough, crude. One is not feeling well. The bartender gives him something for his stomach.

> “Jesus Christ,” he says.
> “He was pretty good in there,” another responds.
> “Why didn’t he come down off the cross?”
> “He didn’t want to come down.”
> “Show me a guy who doesn’t want to come down off a cross,” the first solider says. “I see a lot of them. Any time you show me one that doesn’t want to get down off the cross when the time comes—I’ll climb right up with him.”
> And the other says, “I thought he was pretty good in there today.”
> (*The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway,* p. 356)

“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” Part of what has been so compelling about it is the sense that it didn’t have to happen. He could have avoided it. He could have stayed in the safety of Galilee instead of going to Jerusalem for the Passover. He didn’t have to go to the very place where those who hated him were prominent and powerful. He didn’t have to enter the city in a way that was provocative: riding in on a donkey in the very way the messiah was promised to come. He didn’t have to go to the temple and upset the tables of the merchants and moneychangers. He could have fought back and tried to escape when the soldiers arrested him. He easily could have mounted a defense in front of the secret court that tried him, easily could have argued that he meant no harm. And he could at least have tried to convince Pilate, the Roman governor, that he certainly meant no disrespect to Rome or Caesar, that he had only a few peasants for followers, unarmed. Pilate seems to have wanted to be convinced to set him free.

He did none of that. And the people who have thought much about it, the scholars and the historians, as they have to tried to pin down the reasons for his execution—how he alienated powerful people in his own religious community, how he irritated the Romans—conclude finally that a major reason for his death was his own intentionality. If he did not mean to die, he certainly meant to live with the consistent integrity that made his death inevitable. Which is another way of saying that he really meant it when he said a grain of wheat that falls into the earth and dies bears much fruit; really, truly meant it when he said, “If you want to keep your life you will lose it, but if you lose your life for my sake you will find it.”

British theologian, N. T. Wright wrote recently that “crucifixion was a powerful symbol throughout the Roman world. It was not just a means of liquidating someone: it did so with a maximum of degradation and humiliation. It said, loud and clear, ‘We are in charge here: you are our property: we can do what we like with you’” (*Christian Century,* Easter 2003).

He died, I believe, because he refused to compromise, because he truly believed that the way to real life—eternal life, he called it—is to live for others. He died because, in Dietrich Bonhoffer’s memorable phrase, he was “the Man for Others.”

He died for his people—poor, oppressed by Rome, persecuted, trampled on. He identified with them. He identified with all the nobodies of the world of all ages who are not in control of their destinies: the poor, the homeless, the weak, the powerless. Throughout all of human history, the poor and weak have always understood the crucifixion, perhaps better than anyone else.

He identifies with all those who know they are not in control: those whose lives and deaths are in the control of huge forces and movements.

Iraqi women and children, desperate, frightened, caught in the middle of enormous geo-political forces over which they have no control

U.S. Marines, soldiers, and pilots obeying orders, in harm's way this morning, doing their duty, having to make precarious, instantaneous life-and-death decisions

The critically ill in hospitals and intensive care wards, no longer in control, subjected to surgeons, technicians, viruses, malignancies, chemotherapy

People who live with relentless pain, people who are sick and dying

—that's who Jesus identified with and that's who understands him; that's who turns to him and embrace him.

He died to show us that when our lives seem out of control for whatever reason, there is one who knows, understands, and draws us to himself. He died, I believe, to teach us how to live: to call us out of selfishness; to show us how really to live by loving passionately, by caring deeply, by giving our love, our resources to others, to causes that matter.

"We hunger, not just to be loved but to love," Frederick Buechner wrote. "When Jesus commanded us to love our neighbors as ourselves, it was not just for our neighbors' sake, but for our sakes as well" (*The Longing for Home*, p. 138).

And he died, I believe, to teach us not to be afraid, to show us that there is a force more powerful than death, namely the love of God, and because of that—God's love—there is always life, right in the middle of death.

A bright, wonderful young couple lost their sixteen-month-old baby daughter recently. Maya was full of life, curious about everything, laughed easily and often, was affectionate and bright, and she died tragically. The couple is part of our family of faith, and what they did and said inspired me —so much so that I did something I don't ordinarily do: I asked them if I might share this today.

In the midst of the horrible shock of their baby's death and their overwhelming grief, they had to make a very difficult decision. Maya had been so healthy; the doctors told them that her heart and lungs were desperately needed and could be used for transplants. The couple, in their tears, thought about it—not very long actually—prayed about it, talked it over, made their decision, and agreed to allow the doctors to proceed.

A few days later at the memorial service, the sanctuary was nearly full: their friends, family, family friends, colleagues from work. The young man and woman wanted to speak to the gathered community. Maya's father thanked everyone for coming and thanked everyone for all the love and prayers and said that it had somehow made the past several days possible for his wife and for him. And then Maya's mother spoke out of her grief about her sixteen-month-old daughter who was gone, and she said that she was comforted and strengthened by the love and prayers of everyone but particularly by the thought that there were several babies who would live now and grow and be children and adolescents and adults and maybe get married and have children of their own because Maya had died.

It was a moment of truth—terrible, beautiful truth, like the moment Jesus said, "If a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it bears much fruit."

Why did Jesus die?

He died because he really believed that in living for others, we become the men and women God created us to be.

He died to show us how to live: to save us from our sins, to show God's love and forgiveness and reconciling grace that covers, pays for, redeems everything we have done to separate ourselves from God and others. But more than that even. He died to save our souls from narrowness, from the confines of our own selfishness. He died to call us out of our self-concern, our stress and anxiety about careers and how much money we earn, to a life lived in the glorious freedom of his love.

He died to show us that we need never be afraid of anything.

"And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."

Amen.